DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 248 639 EC 170 417

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TITLE The Importance of Play and Games in the Middle School Program for Emotionally Disturbed Young Adolescents.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Minnesota Conference on Programming for the Developmental Needs of Adolescents with Behavioral Disorders (Minneapolis, MN, Fall, 1982). Contained in EC 170 401.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Emotional Disturbances; *Games; Middle Schools; *Play; *Therapy

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The therapeutic utilization of play and games as a major curricular concentration offers potential for the enhancement of cognitive, social/emotional, and physical development of young emotionally disturbed adolescents. The theory is illustrated with examples from related literature, the clinical experience of the authors, and descriptive material drawn from a public school therapeutic middle school program. Illustrations included in this discussion are examples of potential learnings to be developed through play and games in the middle school curriculum. Although extensive examples are drawn from an operating middle school program, these are to make the theoretical stance concrete rather than to feature a particular program. Thus definitive evaluative statements about the results of the emphasis of play and games in this particular program are not made. In addition, data evaluating the program have not been collected to isolate particular aspects of the curricula. Impressionistic experiences, substantiated by outside observers of the program, indicate that the role of play and games in this curriculum are important determinants for student growth. Suggested steps for incorporating systematic evaluative data in this and other situations are included. (Author/CL)

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The Importance of Play and Games in the Middle School Program for Emotionally Disturbed Young Adolescents

Gayle Mindes and Kathleen Torina Murphy

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ABSTRACT

The therapeutic utilization of play and games as a major curricular concentration offers potential for the enhancement of cognitive, social/emotional, and physical development of young emotionally disturbed adolescents. This theoretical stance is developed first through a description of the developmental concept of play and games. The theory is illustrated with examples from related literature, the clinical experience of the authors, and descriptive material drawn from a public school therapeutic middle school program. Illustrations included in this discussion are examples of potential learnings to be developed through play and games, types of play which can be used, and steps for preparing for play in the middle school curriculum. Although extensive examples are drawn from an operating middle school program, these are to make the theoretical stance concrete rather than to feature a particular program. Thus definitive evaluative statements about the results of the emphasis of play and games in this particular program are not made. In addition, data evaluating the program have not been collected to isolate particular aspects of the curricula. Impressionistic experiences, substantiated by outside observers of the program, indicate that the role of play and games in this curriculum are important determinants for student growth. Suggested steps for incorporating systematic evaluative data in this and other situations are included.

EC170417

What is Play and How Does It Evolve Developmentally?

Play can be defined as a complex process involving social, cognitive, emotional, and physical elements. The process involves voluntarily relating to an aspect of reality as not serious or real. This characterization makes it possible for the child or adolescent to handle issues that might otherwise be confusing, frightening, mysterious, irrelevant, risky, or forbidden. In this manner the child/adolescent evolves competencies and defenses. The process has a developmental sequence from infancy through adolescence/adulthood (Erikson, 1972; Garvey, 1977).

The normal developmental continuum of play beings with the sensorimotor experimentation of the infant (Piaget, 1962). Infants play zestfully through experimental body movements and vocalizations. As the infant matures, he

involves others in his play and the first games of childhood emerge in such activities as Peek-a-Boo. Toddlers demonstrate their growing mastery of the world through the symbolic incorporation of small toys in play (Erikson, 1963). Preschool children begin to interact cooperatively with peers and a dominant character of play at this period is dramatic play (Peller, 1971), the playing out of real life themes through characterizations such as prominent television heroes, story book figures, and family experiences. At this stage young children continue to utilize sensorimotor play with increased gross and fine motor competence (Hartley, Frank, & Goldenson, 1952). Additionally, preschoolers show increased interest and capacity to create and solve constructive activities such as art projects, puzzles, and small block constructions. As the early years merge into the schoolage years, young children show their budding capacity to deal with the real world of work in the quality of their play, which becomes less overtly fanciful and more orderly (Erikson, 1963). Dramatic play becomes formalized drama and music; art emerges as a product and simple games become more complex. As defined by Piaget (1962, p. 144) the qualities which mark games with rules are competition, regulations by code, tradition, or temporary agreement among individuals. The cognitive complexity of the games of childhood varies. The predominant mode of games may be *sensorimotor,* as in hopscotch; or the mode may be *intellectual,* as in chess; or the mode may involve *collective symbolic action,* as in war games.

From this point in childhood through adolescence and into adulthood, games with rules characterize the leisure and recreational pursuits of socialized individuals (Piaget, 1962). Solitary pursuits allow more option for constructive and fantasy play pursuits. Of course, normal adults and children return upon occasion to earlier stages. Some children never progress through all stages. Research has identified and described some of these differences in play patterns of young handicapped children (Garwood, 1982). These differences depend on the nature of the handicapping condition, but overall play performance of young handicapped children indicates that they do not play well.

Play and Games in Adolescence

For the emotionally disturbed adolescent the stresses and strains of the period and the resolution of the issues of identity interact to influence the quality and character of the play and games which the adolescent effectively uses (Erikson, 1977). Adolescence is a critical period for youth who seek to retain the roots of childhood, yet face the need to move from dependency to independence, to gain freedom of choice, and to assume responsibility for self in a changing and conflicting world. Issues of attachment, autonomy, intimacy, sexuality, achievement, and identity must be addressed amidst biological change, cognitive growth, and in the context of the reciprocal change of the adolescent's social world of peers, family, and school (Hill, 1980). The way in which the emotionally disturbed adolescent solves these issues depends on the nature of the disturbance, the chronicity of the condition, context, and the severity of the condition. Emotionally disturbed adolescents, like their younger counterparts, frequently are nonplayers, joyless, frightened individuals (Powers, 1980). Some relate to the world through symbols and actions not immediately interpreted by the outside world; these actions may seem playlike or nonsensical to the observer, but in reality they are "dead serious" for the youth. Still others have not addressed the issues of adolescence and remain frozen developmentally at earlier childhood levels;

their play reflects this fixation (Freud, 1965). Teachers can observe adolescents at play and assess their adjustment (Ekstein, 1975, pp. 142-162). Therefore, play should be a core part of the curriculum in all its developmental manifestations.

The recommendations for the therapeutic use of play and games in the curriculum for young emotionally disturbed adolescents must be based on considerations of typical developmental issues as well as the nature of the disturbance and the child's needs (Powers, 1980). In the section which follows, a model program incorporating a wide variety of play opportunities in the curriculum is presented to make this theoretical perspective concrete. Illustrations are drawn from various points in the curriculum to develop examples of the breadth and strength of this approach to therapeutic programming for young emotionally disturbed adolescents. These approaches derive theoretical support from the developmental concept of play as defined and illustrated in an earlier portion of this article. The reader is referred to Schaefer (1976) and Schaefer & O'Connor (1983) for more complete discussions of developmental play theory and therapeutic techniques within the context of this theory.

A Therapeutic Day Treatment Program with Play As a Core Aspect of the Curriculum

The Niles Township Middle School Program is a public school treatment program for children and young adolescents with severe emotional and behavior problems. The major goal of the program is to provide a therapeutic milieu which will foster the emotional growth of each student, thereby enabling him to understand and accept himself, reach out to others, and to adapt to the many demands of society. A complete description of the operating principles and practices of this program is beyond the scope of this article.

There are currently 32 behaviorally disordered children between the ages of 10 and 14 in this middle school; 26 are boys and 6 are girls. Most have been in either behaviorally disordered or learning disabilities programs previously, some for many years. As reported in the psychiatric evaluations and case studies, many of the students have experienced serious emotional traumas, losses, separations, and changes in their lives. At the core of much of the severe behavioral dysfunctioning of the students is severe depression. Others have been diagnosed as borderline psychotic, pre-schizophrenic, or emotionally, developmentally delayed. These emotional difficulties have for many of them contributed to an inaccessibility to learning. Some of the students have not fallen behind academically, but their emotional problems have been expressed in behavior which is unacceptable in more traditional academic settings.

At the middle school the students are involved in an intensive therapeutic milieu program. The basic philosophies of the program are psychodynamic; that is, the goal is to understand and help the young adolescents work through the underlying causes for their problematic behavior and school performance. (cf., Chenney & Morse, 1980, pp. 295-300).

In order to reach the goals of emotional development, a variety of services have been provided: academic instruction, social work services, art therapy, physical education, and crisis intervention. A combination of any or all of the services may be utilized for a given child. Each of these components of the middle school has its unique function but some areas overlap. One of the major areas that overlap is the use of play and games in the broadest sense in the curriculum. From the perspective of the authors, play at the middle school

is a crucial part of the curriculum. Thus, play and games in the middle school curriculum are not frivolous and are not viewed as a reward for positive academic behavior but as an opportunity to develop appropriate behavior. The ego of the normal young adolescent is in a state of disequilibrium (Erikson, 1968). On the one hand there is a desire to grow up and be treated as an adult. On the other, there is a strong regressive pull toward earlier stages of development. While this can be difficult for the adults around him, this regressive pull allows the young adolescent to rework and refine the earlier stages (cf., Blos, 1962). The normal young adolescent can find for himself with the aid of his peers those play and game activities that allow him to work through this task (Sklansky & Lichter, 1957). The disturbed young adolescent is a different story. Most of the students come to the program with an inability to experience pleasure as documented in case study reports. By definition this means they cannot play (Erikson, 1963). But given the upheaval of their developmental stage there is the unique opportunity to provide the environment which will facilitate their play development and lead to higher levels of social skills and academic performance. Play develops curiosity, and curiosity enhances the desire to learn (Bruner, 1972).

What Can Be Learned Through Play and Game Experiences?

Since play and games involve self-choice and structure, the young emotionally disturbed adolescent can experience success in these activities. He can choose an activity at his developmental level — checkers instead of chess, puppet play instead of creative drama, coloring book instead of painting. As he gains satisfaction in these pursuits and is encouraged by teacher or therapist to continue, he gains the courage to venture forward along the developmental continuum with ever more age-appropriate activities. This process occurs in a supportive environment where clear structures are communicated to all participants that individual needs vary. Teachers/therapists protect and support individuals and the integrity of the group. In order to function in this manner, the teacher/therapist must keep firmly in mind the developmental continuum of play and games. Additionally, teachers must be skilled observers and interpreters of the variety of symptom presentations. The play observation is similar to the clinical interview described by Greenspan (1982) in which the teacher/therapist is required to have familiarity with the usual, form action hypotheses, and incorporate personal reactions in the best interests of the young adolescent. This process requires frequent support from colleagues, administration, and consulting mental health professionals. The careful planning and documentation of play and the appropriate provision of challenge permit the adolescent the opportunity to increas his self-control, independence, and initiative. As beginning expriences with peers in simple competitive games involving luck or chance prove successful, he can tolerate the frustration involved in competitive activity. By helping another with a skill, he gains satisfaction and potential status. Thus both cooperation and competition can be learned.

In the affective arena, play and games promote the expression of pleasure, joy, satisfaction, and positive self-esteem. From the cognitive perspective, play and games facilitate decision-making, problem-solving, and verbal expressive skills. Play and games can encourage creativity, encouraging divergent responses, ideational fluency, spontaneity, flexibility, originality. In enhancement of the self, play and games can facilitate the development of a sense of humor, leadership, and exploration (Bruner, Jolly, & Sylva, 1976).

Types of Play Used at the Middle School

Play and games are an integral part of the curriculum, sometimes even more important than academic achievement. Students do not tire of play and games, even through a substantial portion of the day offers opportunity for such activity. This phenomenon is due in part to two factors: first, the presented variety of opportunities is extensive throughout the day; second, the play or game is chosen by the student (within the range of available alternatives at a given time). By definition, the student must actively choose to absorb himself in play or games. This voluntary choice distinguishes play and games in the therapeutic interests of the young adolescent from the teacher-made or determined playlike activity. Of course, there are periods or times when individuals choose nonplay; this phenomenon occurs in relation to their emotional state rather than necessarily a conscious choice for nonparticipation. Teachers intervene to encourage, but cannot force, require, or direct play by definition.

The special education teacher does not try to recreate the microcosm of the regular class where the youngsters have failed. Teachers use play as tension regulators, diagnostic evaluation tools, methods for developing social skills, group cohesiveness, and safe return to earlier stages of development.

Play as tension regulator: Free play scheduled before or after academic work which is particularly frustrating can serve to release pentup frustration in an appropriate manner. In one of the classes, the time is spent building with blocks, leggos, and erector sets. The results of this opportunity to play are the binding of anxiety, the channeling of impulses. Such constructive play can be done cooperatively or alone. Many children with severe problems of impulse control welcome the structure of the compulsively structured play activities. Other activities helpful in this regard are jigsaw puzzles and arcade computer games. In some cases, students have built large fortlike structures that remain in the classroom and serve as preservers of privacy, an important provision for adolescents.

Play as diagnostic indicator: Board games can serve well in this function; the teacher can observe how the student approaches rules and follows directions. How does the student handle competition, relationships with peers and adults, winning, losing? The information obtained can assist teachers in knowing how much to plan for the child academically. For example, can the child engage in a game of monopoly that must be continued for a week or more? If so, he may be ready to assume responsibility for term papers, home work, or other continuous academic tasks.

Observed in field situations, students may show other facets of their personalities. The timid, shy, withdrawn boy who is a fisherman may have the opportunity to demonstrate his water and boat proficiency and thereby be seen as more competent than his peers and teacher had realized.

Records of student progress are kept in anecdotal form by teachers and are shared formally in case conferences and informally through the supervisory and peer channels of communication. In addition, the emerging art project, block structure, or other play/game product can be preserved long enough for analysis. Other methods for recording or sharing diagnostic impressions would be possible, but are not currently in operation. The primary mode for the teacher in this setting is reflected hypothesis testing in the clinical sense that was described earlier. A complete discussion of the teacher's role in this diagnostic process is beyond the scope of this article.

Play as a method to develop group social skills and group cohesiveness: One quite successful example of group cohesion was the participation on a

competitive basketball team. The team was open to all students in the school. Students were required to learn official rules and abide by team standards of good sportsmanship. In this enterprise no one, no matter how poorly he played, was excluded or scapegoated. Growth and pleasure were observed through the interscholastic season.

A second opportunity for the establishment of group cohesion occurred in the park district team obstacle course, which requires the demonstration of trust and cooperation in order to successfully complete the course.

Simulation games for the academically more capable students have also been successfully incorporated in the curriculum. The benefits of the use of these games in education have been described in terms of permitting students opportunities to suspend school regulations, experiment with new roles and ideas. As well, teachers are freed from traditional roles of being arbiter of right answers and the truth. Students have attention on the game due to high active involvement. Chance and skill and student control are important features of these games. Such games offer opportunities for students with a wide range of skills to participate successfully (Coleman, 1971).

Play as a means to return to earlier stage of development: This year students have volunteered to go to the early childhood classrooms to play with the young children. Through such activities as water play, painting, sand play, and building with small blocks, the adolescents will have the opportunity to play at the earlier level of development with the socially acceptable proviso of helping the younger children.

What Is Involved in Preparing for Play in the Middle School Curriculum?

First, it is important to mantain a firm notion of the developmental sequence of play, for as described earlier, emotionally disturbed young adolescents are not usually good players (Huber, 1980). Their play follows the trends of normal with specific deviations based on the nature of their disturbance. Their lives do not often permit play: they cannot sustain the necessary attention to concentrate on play activities, they need to play through the same themes of earlier years for security's sake, they must strike out at the world before it strikes them, they fear the demonstration of their competencies since more may then be expected of them, etc. (Powers, 1980). For all these reasons, the quality of the play of emotionally disturbed adolescents is not typical. That is, they are not seen typically as involved successfully in competitive sports, as winners of arcade games, as skilled artists, or seen to exhibit much joy.

Through the skillful provision of play opportunities at various levels in the developmental continuum, teachers can offer chances for success and improved play for the young emotionally disturbed adolescent. Some general guidelines to follow include:

- Provision of sufficient time for students to engage in sustained, meaningful play. With 5 minutes left after finishing work, there is not enough time to start to play a game: periods must be of 20-30 minutes duration at a minimum, preferably of 45 minutes to 1 hour.
- Setting of parameters for the use of props and materials. Student choice of activity does not need to be free-for-all. Limits for number and kinds of activities to be conducted at particular dates and times can and should be specified.
- Sensitive intervention in and support of play and games, as they occur in the classroom. Teachers must be observant of student needs for assistance, prevention of explosions, etc. Playtime is not a time for teacher coffee breaks, marking papers, etc. Teachers who observe and interact as

called for, communicate to the young adolescents that play time is important and worthy of their attention.

- Provision of student choice of activity with a range of appropriate limits for the group. Since play serves the need of the student best if he chooses what and how to play, a range of materials and situations must be available to facilitate the needs of the entire group. Opportunities for games of chance and skill at various levels should be included.
- Opportunities for individuals to select, to involve themselves with others, or to engage in solitary pursuits. Forced participation in group activity or games is not play. The voluntary control element is lost in those contrived and teacher-directed situations. Opportunities for choice of when and how to participate in group interaction must be offered for the child who is exploring his capacity for social interaction.
- Support for those making their first attempts at meaningful social play. Through careful observation the teacher can assist as a bridge to social interaction for the child who is learning to relate to others through play or ask a more able peer to assist in these first attempts at social interaction.
- Provision of activities/props to stimulate both boys and girls, youth from all socioeconomic levels and with a wide range of abilities. Research with younger children and in other countries indicates that the nature and kind of play differs with age, culture, sex role identity, and social class (cf., Bruner, Jolly, & Sylva, 1976). Play at the middle school must meet the appropriate diversity of the group.
- Opportunities for the expression of the multidimensional aspects of play — socioemotional, cognitive, physical — which will afford chances for success for the divergent group.

In these situations the role of the teacher is unobtrusive, not to be equated with benign neglect. The smooth functioning classroom at play can be deceiving, allowing for some confusion, mess, and noise. The casual observer who sees a smooth, even operation may think "nothing's wrong with these kids," when, in fact, the teacher has utilized mighty creative and physical energy to create this smooth appearance. She has managed to challenge, channel, and choreograph youth who act out, retreat, and generally demonstrate immaturity. These kids are playing . . . darts, Uno, chess, Monopoly . . . with concentration and enthusiasm.

IMPRESSIONISTIC INDICATIONS OF PROGRAM SUCCESS

Since extensive examples have been drawn for the theoretical argument of the importance of play and games in curricula for the emotionally disturbed young adolescent from a particular middle school program, some indicators of program success are offered. In the 4 years that the program has been operating, approximately 25 students have graduated. The bulk of those graduating have been placed in a special off-campus high school program for half a day, with individualized alternatives of mainstream, vocational placement, or other alternative planned. Clinical experiences with these youngsters is reported by supervisory/consultative personnel at the high school. The graduates of this program, in contrast to those from a more traditional self-contained special education approach, are found to be more ready to accept supportive help and know how to ask for it. Students from the therapeutic middle school program form more in-depth relationships. In general, the adjustment of these students is reported to be sufficiently even enough that in contact with peers in regular education situations, they do not stand out as different or deviant.

More immediate indicators of current success include the replicated observations of program staff which indicates that play growth is parallel to academic growth. Students tend to approach academic tasks quantificatively differently; that is, with more willingness to risk failure, to explore the difficult. A brief illustration is the case of one youngster who began playing checkers and simple challenge games with a therapist. Initially, he cheated frequently. When the therapist reflected cheating by engaging in the behavior herself — rather than continuing to discuss the appropriateness of the behavior — the contest or game between the two became one of becoming a proficient cheater. As the therapeutic insight came to the young man, he no longer found it necessary to cheat and began to enjoy intellectually more challenging games. Correspondingly, teachers reported that his performance in academic situations improved as well.

Some children enter the program as relatively strong successes academically, only a year or so behind grade level. Frequently these young adolescents are nonplayers in the sense that their behavior in play situations is repetitive and purposeless or socially isolating. As such youngsters are able to engage in short meaningful play or game episodes with peers or teachers/therapists, they make corresponding gains beyond the comprehension level of academic activity that is at the level of analysis, synthesis.

SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS

For this program to be effectively evaluated, more systematic records of play and game activity must be kept for curricular evaluation purposes. Details of academic achievement, progress in family or individual counseling, and other program aspects must be compared. Documents recording clincical progress could be analyzed. In this way support for this particular approach may be offered through the naturalistic case study analysis of an operating program. In the meantime the authors hope others will continue to try the approach with suitable modifications for the degree of mainstream contact sustained by program participants. As with other descriptions of the therapeutic use of games (Nickerson & O'Laughlin, 1983), no concrete or hard and fast evidence can be offered for this approach in operation, but clinical judgment which occurs daily, weekly, and annually in the multidisciplinary interchange among staff indicates that play and games are effectively utilized by program participants and that change or learning occurs: cognitively, physically, and in the social/emotional sphere.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this article play and games have been viewed as an integral part of the curriculum for emotionally disturbed young adolescents. The need for careful assessment of developmental level through clinical observation and as reflected in play and academic performance was highlighted. Opportunities through the day to build on strengths and to permit each youth to try newly acquired competencies in play and game situations require choices which range from Bombardment, on the gym floor, to board games; simulation games; creative drama; art therapy; horse back riding and swimming; Atari; ping-pong; cards; construction activities with leggos and large blocks. In each of these situations the teacher or therapist must carefully monitor and structure the environment to permit maximum freedom and support for the players. Structuring and monitoring are possible through awareness of developmental levels, and systematic utilization of clinical observation and

interview techniques. Nonplayers should be encouraged and enticed into attempts to play and should be supported through those beginning steps.

Through play the emotionally disturbed youth gains important skills which translate to better adjustment: self-confidence, frustration tolerance, security, good sportsmanship, loyalty, capacity to compete. Play and games provide a common experience and language for teachers and students. A neutral ground is established which avoids the negative connotation of the previous school experience. The teachers communicate an acceptance of the child as he is through their participation in and structuring of play situations.

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